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U.S. Assumes the Israelis Have A-Bomb or Its Parts

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 17—For at least two years the United States Government has been conducting its Middle East policy on the assumption that Israel either possesses an atomic bomb or has component parts available for quick assembly, reliable sources report.

Throughout this period there has been some disagreement among senior Government officials over whether the evidence for that assumption is absolutely conclusive. But this disagreement has reportedly centered at times on such narrow technicalities as the "last-wire issue"—whether Israel should be judged to have an atomic weapon before the last wire or piece of the mechanism is hooked up.

Both former President Lyndon B. Johnson and President Nixon are understood, however, to have received intelligence assessments that Israel has the capacity to assemble an atomic bomb on short notice and that some senior officials believe she has already done so. But the United States Government has been so sensitive to the grave implications of the issue that it has not developed a fully coordinated national intelligence estimate, which would circulate within the Government, that says directly that Israel does have atomic weapons.

As long ago as 1968 the White House had no doubt that Israel could produce an atomic bomb or warhead for her French-built surface missile and that if such a weapon was not already in being, it was "within very easy range," one highly placed source reported.

The renewed efforts of The New York Times to examine this question were prompted by comments on television last Sunday by Senator Stuart Symington. Appearing on the Columbia Broadcasting System program "Face the Nation," the Missouri Democrat said he felt that there was no question that Israel is doing its best to develop nuclear weapons.

When asked point-blank whether Israel now has atomic bombs, Mr. Symington, a member of the Armed Services, and Foreign Relations Committees, replied: "We're getting close to something I can't talk about."

Israel Position Given

Israel has taken the public position that she is not a nuclear power and that she will not be the first state to introduce nuclear arms into the Middle East. Privately, responsible Israeli officials are said to have told American officials that this means Israel will not be the first Middle Eastern state to use or test atomic arms. This could not be confirmed with Israeli sources.

American sources all emphasize that there are no indications that Israel has deployed any of her mobile surface missiles. American officials also assert that they have no reason to believe that Israel would use atomic weapons except in the most dire emergency, as Senator Symington suggested.

The Nixon Administration, though obviously mindful of the special dangers that Israeli nuclear arms would pose for the situation in the Middle East, is not disseminating information or trying to use this issue in its current diplomacy. Officials are exceedingly reluctant to discuss the matter because of what one official termed its explosive implication for the Arab countries and the Soviet Union as well as for the United States and Israel.

The presumption here is that the Soviet Union would come under strong pressure to provide the United Arab Republic with nuclear weapons once the Arab countries came to believe Israel had atomic arms. American officials believe that Moscow, fearful of the grave risks to the world of a Middle Eastern nuclear race, would be extremely reluctant to take such a step. The United States assessment is that without direct help from the Soviet Union, no Arab country is close to developing nuclear weapons.

Somber Appraisal Reported

Reliable sources reported that a somber appraisal of Israel's nuclear capability was conveyed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Richard Helms, Director of the

Central Intelligence Agency at a closed-door hearing on July 7.

Mr. Helms was reported to have said that the American estimate was that Israel has the technical capacity to make atomic weapons. In the early and middle sixties, such estimates were reportedly qualified by the proviso that Israel had the capacity to produce such weapons in 12 to 18 months, then later 6 to 9 months, and finally the time lapse was dropped entirely.

The absence of any reference to any such time delay, according to well-informed sources, indicated the official belief that Israel had the fissionable material and the mechanisms ready for rapid assembly, if not actual weapons as well.

Short of direct acknowledgment from the Israeli Government or independent intelligence information verifying the existence of Israeli atomic weapons, informants said, the United States cannot say that it has concrete proof of the existence of Israeli atomic weapons.

Nonetheless, some American officials have felt since mid-1968 that persuasive evidence had built up. Subsequently, Congressional sources quoted Government officials as having said privately that they believed or assumed that Israel had sufficient components for assembling atomic weapons. One senior official reportedly remarked that if the Israelis did not actually possess weapons, "they're seven and a half months pregnant." At the highest levels, such judgments appear to be based on more than circumstantial evidence.

In December, 1969, when Israel was negotiating with the United States for the purchase of 50 Phantom F-4 jet aircraft, Israeli officials reportedly asked the Defense Department to have some of them equipped with racks for nuclear bombs.

The Johnson Administration rejected the request. Some officials took this as indirect confirmation for their earlier belief that Israel was arming herself with atomic weapons.

Circumstantial Evidence Cited

Included in the circumstantial evidence cited by these sources was the following information: Reports dating back to 1963 that the Israeli Government had decided to develop capability; Israel's contract with the Marcel Dassault Aviation Company of France for 25 surface missiles, designated the MD-660 or MD-620, and capable of carrying warheads of 1,000 to 1,200 pounds; French 24-megawatt nuclear reactor at Dimona, which Israeli officials said at first was a textile plant

before later acknowledging its real function; reports credited here that Israel was buying uranium oxide and other raw material in Argentina and possibly Africa for her nuclear-fission process at Dimona; repeated reports that some Israeli officials were hinting or saying privately that Israel had or would soon have atomic weapons, though these remarks could never be verified.

Before the Arab-Israeli war in June, 1967, United States officials had information that Israeli scientists had collaborated closely with French experts in former President Charles de Gaulle's program to develop French atomic weapons.

The American judgment was that Israel was rewarded for her contributions to the French program, both with missile contracts and with secret help for the Israeli atomic-weapons program. If Israeli scientists had access to information on the French atomic tests, it was pointed out, this would reduce Israel's need to test her own weapons.

American intelligence officials reportedly concluded that Israel's surface missile program did not make much sense militarily unless Israel intended to fit the missiles with nuclear warheads. With normal explosives, the two-stage, solid-fuel missile would not be an effective weapon. France was reported to have tested 11 such missiles for Israel and then, by American account, shipped 14 more to Israel. Israeli officials have said that they have received no operational missiles from France and have none today.

'Jericho' Reported Bought

Under her contract with Dassault, dating back to the time of the Algerian revolution, when French relations with the Arabs were at their low ebb, Israel is reported to have paid more than \$100-million for the surface missiles, nicknamed "Jericho" by American intelligence.

With a range of 280 miles, this missile could reach from Israel to the Egyptian heartland, to virtually all of Syria, Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia and western Iraq.

Israel is reported to have established plants of her own near Tel Aviv for manufacturing solid propellants and en

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gines for such missiles. Washington has also received reports that Israel has developed mobile erector platforms for them and is operating test facilities for engines and other equipment. But Israeli officials say that none of the missiles are as yet operational.

Concerned by Implications

Both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations have also been concerned by the implications of Israel's refusal to sign the treaty to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, despite repeated urging and pressure from the United States to do so.

At the time of the Phantom deal, Paul C. Warnke, then Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, was reported by several informants to have demanded that Israel agree to a provision in the contract giving her promise to sign the nuclear treaty and not to deploy her surface missiles.

These sources reported that Itzhak Rabin, the Israeli Ambassador who was negotiating the contract with Mr. Warnke, objected and then Israel made representations to the White House. Shortly thereafter, at White House instructions, the American demands were dropped and the contract was signed without them, former officials of the Johnson Administration report. Neither Mr. Warnke nor Ambassador Rabin would comment on these reports.

Subsequent efforts have been made by the Nixon Administration to get Israel to sign the nuclear treaty but Israel takes the position that the matter is still under study, especially the proposed verification procedures. Israeli officials say that in any case Israel is not a nuclear power, a phrase they do not define more precisely.

Israel's argument is that if the Soviet Union has its way on verification procedures, Israel's scientific and conventional military installations will be subjected to international inspection — and thereby vulnerable to espionage. Israel

says this is unacceptable, hence the delay on approving the treaty.

Normally, information on a critical security question is fed into a formal process that concludes with a national intelligence estimate — a combined and agreed assessment of the Central Intelligence Agency, State Department, Defense Department, and other appropriate arms of the Government.

Administration sources insist that on the question of Israeli nuclear capabilities, there has never been "an informed considered United States judgment"—a national intelligence estimate—although there have been interagency discussions.

Well-placed informants say that the issue has been so sensitive that the personal assessments of Mr. Helms and other senior advisers have been passed directly to Presidents Johnson and Nixon, and restricted from normal circulation within the Government and the intelligence community.

Source Is Undetermined

By some American estimates, Israel had acquired considerably more than 30 pounds of weapons-grade plutonium by early 1968. Specialists estimate that about 20 pounds would be sufficient for a plutonium bomb. It could not be learned where Israel reportedly obtained this material. French help, during the period prior to the Arab-Israeli war in June 1967, is reported to have been very important to the Israeli nuclear weapons program.

The French-built reactor at Dimona is capable of producing enough plutonium for a few small bombs. But American officials report no evidence that Israel has mastered the complex chemical processes for refining weapons-grade plutonium from the highly toxic plutonium produced by the Dimona reactor. Nor is evidence available, officials say, that Israel has a plant for separating the plutonium from the radioactive fuel rods removed from this reactor.

Washington does not exclude

the possibility, however, that France agreed secretly years ago to provide Israel with weapons-grade plutonium in return for some of the reusable radioactive materials from the Dimona reactor.

About two years ago, some knowledgeable sources report, some fissionable material from the Dimona reactor was diverted from normal peaceful uses and disappeared. It is not known whether this was diverted to weapons use, but that is the strong presumption here.

U.S. Inspection Trip Made

For several years American technical experts have made inspection trips to the Dimona reactor. Each year they have reportedly been somewhat dissatisfied that their inspection was hurried and limited, but they have never reported finding any evidence of weapons-related research there. The 1969 inspection team complained in writing about the limitations on its inspections and reportedly stated that, for this reason, it could not guarantee that there was no weapons-related work at Dimona.

The United States Government's refusal to discuss this issue fully in public reaches beyond its concern over the impact that any revelations would have in the Middle East.

Washington is fearful that if it becomes known or widely assumed that nuclear weapons have been developed by any nation besides the acknowledged nuclear powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and Communist China, this may jeopardize the entire international effort to prevent their spread.

American officials are particularly worried about the pressures that this may put on such countries as India, Japan and Sweden, which are believed to have the technical capacities for producing atomic arms, but are not believed to have done so or to have moved as close to it as has Israel.